

Bawm Language and Lore **(Tibeto-Burman Area)**

Thesis
presented to the Faculty of Arts
of
the University of Zurich

for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

VERENA REICHLE
of Zurich

Accepted by the Faculty of Arts
on the Recommendation of
Professor L. G. Löffler



Peter Lang
Berne · Francfort am Main · Las Vegas
1981



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Partial Print:

The complete work is being published as volume 14 of the series
XXI (Linguistics) of the European University Studies by Peter Lang
Inc., Berne.



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Printed by fotokop wilhelm weihert KG, Darmstadt (RFA)

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INTRODUCTION

1. THE BAWM-ZO

Bawm is spoken by the Bawm-Zo¹, a hill tribe of the Chin groups living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, the border area to Burma. Their number was estimated to be about 4900 in 1966 by H.J. Spielmann². The following ethnographic data are taken from his survey. The Chittagong Hill Tracts are not open to ethnographic investigation at the present time, and more recent data is not available.

In 1966, the Bawm-Zo were one of the smallest groups in the area. They lived in 45 villages, in close contact with other ethnic groups.³ The history of the Bawm-Zo shows that they are a conglomerate of originally different tribes, which is still reflected in their social stratification. Their ruling class stemmed from the Zahau, Sunthla and Haka, all of them Chin groups in the Falam region, Chin Hills, Burma. Around 1800, splinter groups of these emigrated westwards and around 1860 settled in the western region of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where they still live today. During their migrations, they raided villages and incorporated people of other ethnic groups (mainly Mru, Khumi and Marma), while other groups on their part did the same to them.

¹The Bawm-Zo are known by different names in the older literature (cf. Spielmann p.39). Other names are: Banjogis, Bunjogis, Bom-Laejo. Their own name for themselves is Bawm-Zo. Löffler uses Bom-Zou, which is a phonemic transcription of the anglicized spelling Bawm-Zo. Towards other Chin groups, the Bawm-Zo call themselves Bawm-Laizo, to stress their affiliation with the Lai of the Haka region (Chin Hills, Burma). "Zo" (*-you) is the self-designation of almost all Chin groups of Southern Assam (the 'Mizo Hills'), Aracan and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. They are called Chin by the Burmese and Kuki by the Bengali. (Cf. Löffler, 1959, p.259)

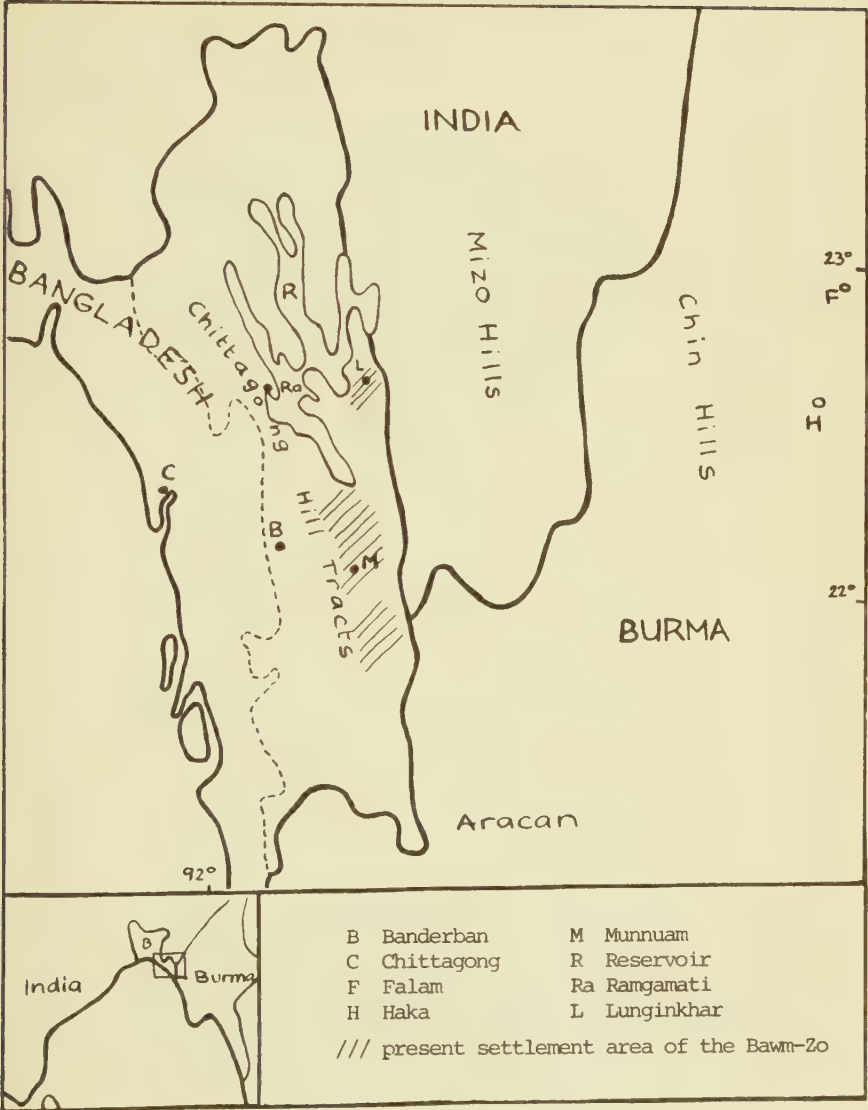
²H.J. Spielmann, "Die Bawm-Zo, eine Chin-Gruppe in den Chittagong Hill Tracts (Ost-Pakistan)", Heidelberg 1968.

³Other Chin groups, such as the Khumi, Pângkhua, Mru and Khyang, as well as groups of different linguistic affiliation: Tippera (Barish), Marma (Burmish) and Chakma (a dialect of Bengali).

The Bawm-Zo still mainly practise shifting cultivation. Mountain rice is their main crop besides cotton, beans, mustard and fruit. Animal husbandry is of minor importance. Their agricultural surplus is traded in for commodity goods at the Bengali bazars of the valleys.

From 1921 onwards, the Bawm-Zo were christianized by missionaries from the Lushai, a closely related group. The Lushai themselves had been converted by London Baptist missionaries. The earliest of these (from 1894 onwards) were Lorrain and Savidge, who also compiled an English-Lushai dictionary and devised an anglicized writing system for Lushai, which was then taken over for Bawm. In 1966, 86 % of the Bawm-Zo were Christians. The work on the translation of the Bible from Lushai into Bawm started in 1959 under the supervision of the Bible Society of Bangkok. Part of these translations were used for the present analysis.

Map of the settlement area of the Bawm-Zo



2. GENETIC CLASSIFICATION OF BAWM

Bawm belongs to the Central Branch of Kukish, a section of the Tibeto-Burman or Burmic division of the Sino-Tibetan language family. This classification is generally agreed upon, while the levels of the branchings of the subgroups differ in different classifications.

The classifications of R. Shafer¹ and P.K. Benedict² are presented below. Only those branches are drawn in the diagram through which Bawm is either directly connected or which are immediate branches of the direct line.

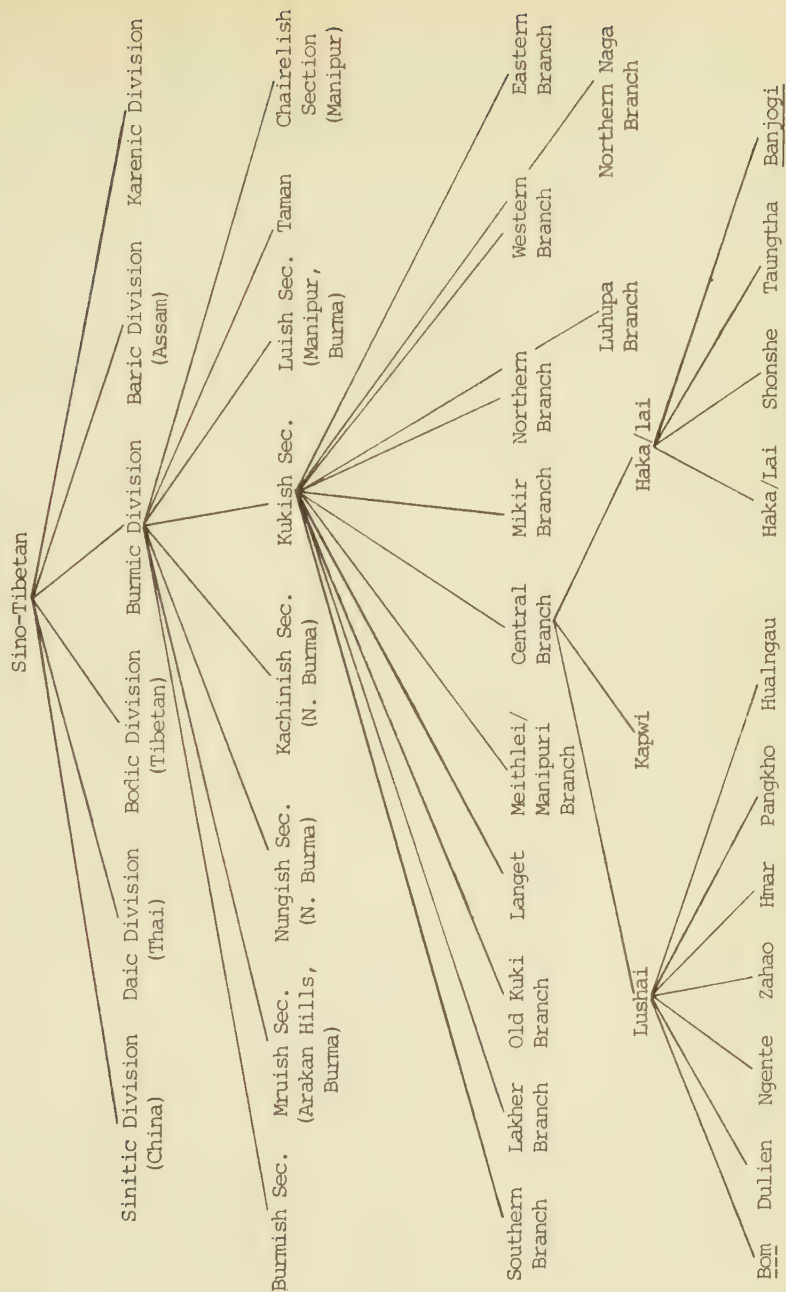
Shafer distinguishes between Bom and Banjogi and classifies Bom as belonging to the Lushai unit and Banjogi as belonging to the Haka/Lai unit. The vocabulary on which Shafer bases the classification of Bawm was published by M. Barbe in 1845, who speaks of "Bunzoo" calling themselves "Bom". The language recorded by Barbe, however, seems to be Pāngkhua, it certainly is not Bawm. On the other hand, what Shafer calls Banjogi is identical with Bawm.³

¹Shafer Robert, 1966, "Introduction to Sino-Tibetan".

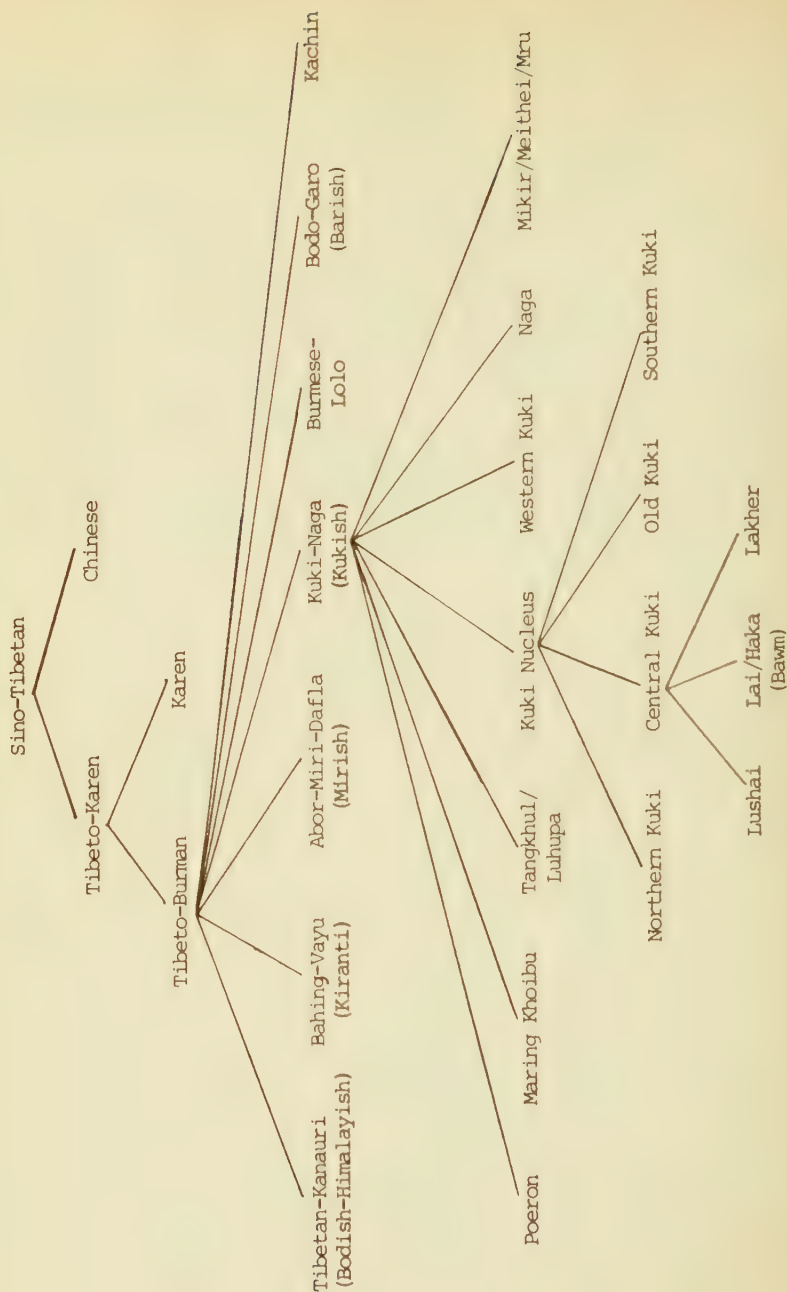
²Benedict Paul K., 1972, "Sino-Tibetan, a Conspectus".

³Oral information from L.G. Löffler, who also agrees with the classification of Bawm as belonging to the Haka/Lai unit. Cf. also Löffler, 1959, p.258; and Barbe, Rev. M.: "Some accounts of the Hill Tribes in the Interior of the District of Chittagong", in: Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, 14,1, 1845: pp 380-391.

The classification of Bawn according to R. Shafer



The classification of Bawm according to P. Benedict



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CURRICULUM VITAE

I was born in Rüti/Zürich, Switzerland, on August 1942. After getting a diploma in commerce and a federal "Matura" type B I studied English and German at the University of Zurich. The academic year of 1966/67 I spent at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Ill., USA, where in the fall of 67 I earned a M.A. degree in General Linguistics/Teaching English as a Foreign Language. In 1970 I completed my studies in Zurich with a "Lizentiat", obtained the "Mittelschullehrerdiplom" (diploma for teaching in higher state secondary schools) in 1971 and then taught English at several schools in the Canton of Zurich. During the years of 1973-76 I was an assistant and a lecturer of ethnolinguistics at the University of Zurich. My studies in anthropology were completed in 1979 with the dissertation entitled "Bawm Language and Lore, Tibeto-Burman Area".

